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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000242

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY'S ELECTION BOARD: NO MORE HANDOUTS TO VOTERS

REF: A. ANKARA 205

[1](#)B. ANKARA 201

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara and Consulate Adana cable.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: In the wake of allegations that the governor of Tunceli was misusing state funds to sway the poor to vote for the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey's High Election Board (YSK) issued a statement on February 9 calling for an end to partisan state handouts. It declared that political parties, municipalities, independent candidates, and foundations should not abuse the laws allowing for social assistance in such a way as to sway voters during the campaign leading to nationwide local elections on March 29. Though the decision itself does not carry any weight, it opens the door for complaints to be filed with local prosecutors alleging abuse of office, which could lead to lawsuits against the Tunceli Governor and other alleged election law violators. The decision casts a shadow on AKP, which portrays itself as a party dedicated to good governance, and provides AKP's opposition with campaign fodder. End Summary.

Trade Your Vote for What's Behind Door Number One?

[1](#)3. (C) Mustafa Yaman, as Governor of Tunceli, is the highest administrative official in the province, is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, and is thereby supposed to be impartial in the political realm. He is in charge of the province's Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF) which provides assistance to Turkey's poorest citizens in the form of bread, fuel, and other basic necessities. He also happens to be the brother-in-law of Murat Mercan, a prominent AKP member of Parliament. After investigating a complaint filed by the opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) that alleged Yaman was using the SASF in Tunceli to support the AKP's re-election bid by handing out washing machines, dishwashers and furniture to the poor, the YSK issued a statement that arms of the state and political parties and actors should not issue handouts "using personnel, services, and means for the benefit of a political party or a candidate for any political party." The YSK decision itself is not sufficient to discipline officials who overstep their bounds. It does, however, pave the way for complaints to be brought to local prosecutors who would then be able to open legal cases if the complaints are deemed non-trivial.

¶4. (C) The distribution of goods through the SASF carries a broader concern beyond the March elections and beyond Tunceli province. Members of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) have complained to US Embassy officials at every opportunity that the AKP is trying to create a "beggar culture" to lock down votes. Nevin Gaye Erbatur, a CHP MP from Adana, told us that by providing coal, medicine, and food to poor families without providing them with ways to find jobs or otherwise better their condition, AKP creates a class that depends on the government and fears the support program will end if AKP is voted out of office. Opposition party officials in Tunceli have told us that the money spent on appliances should have instead been used to create employment opportunities for the poor. Ethem Acikalin, the president of the Adana Human Rights Association, pointed out how ridiculous it is to distribute appliances to people who have neither electricity nor running water, and said that the recipients would simply sell what they receive. Every AKP official we've talked to about the incident has, for their part, reiterated that the handouts were not politically motivated, that the SASF program has been in place for years, and that it is up to the discretion of individual governors how SASF funds are to be disbursed.

Why Tunceli?

¶5. (C) It is no surprise that Tunceli is a province where the line of impartiality stretched to breaking. Predominantly Kurdish and Alevi, Tunceli is one of the few

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provinces in Turkey where AKP is largely unpopular, and the only province where it does not have an MP. The incumbent mayor, elected in 2004, is a member of the predominantly Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). Its two members of Parliament were both elected in 2007 as independents; one has since joined the DTP, the other is a Kurdish Alevi political veteran. The CHP and AKP both fared poorly in the 2007 elections, gaining only 16 and 12 percent respectively. The governor's indiscretion is unlikely to propel AKP's candidate to the mayor's office. Both Huseyin Aygun, a former President of the Tunceli Bar Association, and businessman Ibrahim Demir told us that few voters would be swayed by so obvious an election ploy. They believe AKP's leadership apparently feels it needs every vote it can get in an election that will be examined very closely for any sign that the voting public may be disenchanted with AKP leadership.

Comment

¶6. (C) AKP's opponents have long complained that the party is hypocritical in professing to stand for transparency, democracy, and clean government. The allegations of corruption or misuse of office that have surfaced to date have been murky and inconclusive, offering little traction. The case of the Tunceli appliances, however, appears to be a clear-cut story with vivid visuals. Even if the issue does not carry enough weight with the voters in March, it demonstrates the impact AKP has had on appointments in the bureaucracy and, more disturbing, the resulting lack of transparency and impartiality in state bodies.

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